



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 13 December 2011

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE
9th Meeting 2011, Session 4

CONVENER

*David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP)

*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Bill Walker (Dunfermline) (SNP)

*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Amanda Bradley (Enable Scotland)

John Hancox (Scottish Orchards and the Children's Orchard)

Mike Hyatt

Nigel Over (Enable Scotland)

Jim Paterson (Tarbert and Skipness Community Trust)

Linda Whitmore (Enable Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 13 December 2011

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 14:01*]

New Petitions

Education Staff (Training in Learning Disabilities and Autistic Spectrum Disorder) (PE1409)

The Convener (David Stewart): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I welcome you all to the Public Petitions Committee, and I remind everyone to switch off mobile phones and any electronic devices.

The first item on our agenda is consideration of new petitions, and we have two to consider. The first is PE1409, on bridging the training gap. The petition concerns training for education staff on learning disabilities and autistic spectrum disorders. Details can be found in paper PPC/S4/11/9/1. Members should have a note from the clerk, a briefing from the Scottish Parliament information centre, and a copy of the petition.

I welcome our guests from Enable Scotland—Linda Whitmore, who is the development officer for children and young people; Nigel Over, who is a trustee; and Amanda Bradley, who is a member. You are all very welcome, and thank you for coming along. I invite Linda Whitmore to make a short presentation of around five minutes, after which I will throw open the meeting to questions from members of the committee.

Linda Whitmore (Enable Scotland): First of all, thank you for inviting us here today to give evidence. I will give members of the committee a little bit of background on why we arrived at our campaign and petition.

Enable Scotland has a young families support committee, of which Nigel Over and Amanda Bradley are both members. Mandy is the chair, and Nigel is a former chair. The committee is made up of the parents of children and young people with learning disabilities, and of professionals in the field of learning disability. The committee identified a lack of appropriate support in the classroom as a barrier to effective inclusion in mainstream education for children with learning disabilities. Based on their own experiences, parents on the committee felt that one reason for the barrier could be the lack of effective training for teachers and support staff in the classroom. A lot of anecdotal evidence that we gathered from parents across Scotland supported that view.

Earlier this year, Graham Donaldson's review of teacher education highlighted the fact that teachers themselves agree with our conclusion: they feel that the level of training that they receive on additional support needs is inadequate, and they do not feel fully confident in the classroom about their ability to support pupils with additional support needs.

Among the results of the lack of effective classroom support are high exclusion rates. From statistics from the Scottish Government, we know that exclusion rates are twice as high among pupils with a disability, and five times as high among pupils with additional support needs. There are also many cases of so-called informal exclusions—when parents are asked to take their child home for a cooling-off period because the teachers cannot cope with the child's behaviour. Such informal exclusions are never recorded. They are actually illegal, but we know that they are common occurrences.

Another result is lower educational attainment. Again, statistics from the Scottish Government show that only 48 per cent of school leavers with additional support needs achieve five or more standard grades at foundation level. The figure is 92 per cent for school leavers without additional support needs. Pupils with additional support needs are also much less likely to enter employment, further education or training.

There is a huge emotional and physical toll on families when a child is unhappy at school. Both the parents and the children suffer, and Mandy and Nigel will be able to tell you more about that from their experience. Parents have often said to me that they feel that they have to fight for their child's right to effective education that meets their needs. The parents of children without a disability do not have that fight on their hands.

We have found that many parents are choosing to take their children out of mainstream education and place them in special schools. Often they do so reluctantly—their first choice would be for their child to be effectively included in mainstream education—but they feel that it is the only option that is available to them, because they are not satisfied that their child is receiving the support that it needs in the mainstream school.

Having identified the problem, we wanted to know why it has arisen. Last year, we undertook some research relating to the 2010-11 curriculum and published a report called "Bridging the Training Gap"—you might have it in front of you; if not, we can make it available to you—which is based on the results of freedom of information requests to local authorities and universities. Some of the key findings of the report are that two thirds of local authorities give teachers continuing professional development on general additional

support needs and equalities issues, but it is mandatory in only five areas—East Ayrshire, East Lothian, Midlothian, Perth and Kinross and the Scottish Borders. About half of the local authorities deliver a similar type of training to learning support assistants but, again, that is mandatory in only four areas. More than 90 per cent of local authorities offer training to teachers and learning support assistants on specific learning disability-related topics, such as autism, Asperger's, dyslexia and Down's syndrome, but none of that is mandatory. A teacher can go through their entire teaching career without ever having had to undergo training on supporting a child with learning disability in their classroom, even though the chances are extremely high that they will have at least one such child in their classroom every year.

The findings from the universities showed that all initial bachelor of education courses cover general ASN and equalities topics in the core curriculum, and universities say that they embed inclusion in all their modules. Obviously, that is good news, and we are happy about that. However, only three universities—Edinburgh, Aberdeen and the West of Scotland—cover specific ASN topics such as learning disability, dyspraxia, autism and dyslexia as part of their mandatory content. Four universities offer elective modules that cover ASN issues in depth, but the numbers for those modules are heavily capped, and they are always oversubscribed. Incidentally, the students almost always comment on how beneficial those courses are and how much more confident they feel as a result of having taken them.

What can be done about the problem? Enable Scotland is calling for mandatory training for teachers and learning support staff, not only on general topics around ASN, inclusion and equalities but on three specific areas: learning disability and autism awareness, behaviour management, and communication strategies. We would like that training to be delivered by universities as part of their core initial teacher education curriculum, and by local authorities, as part of their annual CPD programme.

We also call on the Scottish Government to ensure that the issue is fully addressed by the Donaldson review partnership group, which was set up this year to implement the recommendations of Graham Donaldson's report, "Teaching Scotland's Future". One of the recommendations was that all new teachers should be confident in their ability to address additional support needs. We whole-heartedly support that recommendation, and we hope that you do, too.

The Convener: Thank you for that comprehensive presentation. I will kick off the questioning. I invite the other witnesses to intervene at any time in answer to my questions and those of my colleagues.

What would the practical reality be for parents and children if your suggestions were accepted? Do you have any specific outcomes in mind? Earlier, you talked about lowering classroom exclusion rates. Is that one of the outcomes that you believe would result from the recommendations?

Linda Whitmore: I will let Mandy Bradley and Nigel Over tell you about the practical benefits for families, but we see lower exclusion rates as almost a by-product of our most important aim, which is to ensure that all pupils are adequately supported in the classroom. We believe that the training that we are calling for would create a much warmer, more inclusive atmosphere not just for children with learning disabilities but for all children, because all children would benefit from that.

The training would have a positive effect on exclusion rates, but it should also improve attainment because, if a child is supported to learn in a way that suits their learning needs, it is more likely that they will have higher attainment when they leave school, whether in terms of academic qualifications or in raised self-esteem, confidence and an ability to lead an independent life.

Amanda Bradley (Enable Scotland): Sending a child to a mainstream school is a stressful experience for most parents, but when your child has a learning disability, it becomes an incredibly stressful experience, because school can be difficult for them every day. It is not just an occasional thing for them; it is an everyday prospect.

Until we developed the petition, I was not aware that teachers were not trained in additional support needs. I assumed that all teachers had some training in that. When we undertook the investigation and the freedom of information request, I helped Linda Whitmore with some of the work, and I was surprised to find out that few teachers have an opportunity to become more up to speed on what is going on.

Things change all the time, so continuing professional development is important, as well as training for new teachers. However, an important starting point is for new teachers to have at least some training on additional support needs, and not just as a modular option. It would be helpful for parents to know that teachers have some knowledge. Families are under an incredible amount of stress, and it is useful for parents to know that their child's educational achievement

can improve no end just by having teachers involved who know that there is something that they can do to help such children.

Teachers often start from the point of not knowing what to do, which means that children are often excluded at a later stage or transferred to a non-mainstream establishment, which is what happened to my child. It was my choice to transfer her to a special school, but with hindsight, it would not have been necessary if the teachers in the mainstream school had had some training on additional support needs.

Nigel Over (Enable Scotland): My son started in an annexe to a mainstream school, which he survived for about the first one and a half years, but I was called in on 15 of the 20 school days in a single month because of his behaviour and disruption. It became apparent that he was dependent on his classroom teacher to translate for him, to try to manage his behaviour, to try to get him involved, and to communicate. When he was out in any of the other classroom settings, he could not cope and the staff did not know how to handle him.

When we sat down and discussed what my son needed in order to prosper in mainstream education, we came up with a shortlist of requirements. At the top were behaviour management and communication strategies and the requirement for all members of staff with whom he would come into contact to understand his disability. He moved to a grant-aided special school, where he has been for the past seven years. In that school, training is provided. Since his move, we have had one or two blips, but the emphasis has always been on his learning, his achievements and his development as a person rather than on how we are going to manage his behaviour and stop the disruption.

If all staff had a better understanding, it would give them confidence and all children would benefit. For me as a father, it would have meant that I was not dragged into the school to discuss the behavioural issues and I would have been able to be more supportive and proactive in relation to learning outcomes. There would also be benefits from the school's perspective.

We focused on exclusions because the statistics on exclusions are available. I asked a quick question of my daughter's headteacher, and the answer was that it takes about 11.5 hours of staff time to deal with an exclusion, and there are roughly 33,000 exclusions a year in Scotland.

The recent BBC documentary, "Classroom Secrets", which was broadcast in July, estimated that three weeks of teaching time is lost each year in every school to low-level disruption in the classroom. If training was delivered, there would

be a colossal improvement in that and teachers, other staff and parents could be more proactive in delivering the education outcomes that we seek.

The Convener: That is helpful. Thank you for those very full answers.

14:15

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I want to start at the beginning. I am under the impression that, when learning difficulties are identified, an education road map is provided for each individual pupil. When Enable identifies difficulties or when people come to Enable to say that their child or relative has difficulties at school, do you find that the difficulties were identified before the child went to school? Are schools and teachers made aware of the difficulties? Autism is a spectrum and dyslexia has many different aspects. Are issues identified before a child goes to school and are schools made aware of them?

Amanda Bradley: My daughter has what used to be referred to as a moderate learning difficulty. Basically, she has a non-specific learning disability, which means that there is no name for it. It was not identified before she went to school. As a parent who has had to fight all the time—although my daughter is now 19, so I do not have to fight so much any more—I know that, once a school identifies that a child has a difficulty, legally, it must go through the process and meet that child's needs. However, schools are often reluctant to identify an issue. That was the case for me and it is the experience of other parents whom we have spoken to.

If a child has more complex and obvious needs, the school cannot avoid the issue and the needs have to be met. The diagnosis is there and that is fine. However, with children who do not have a specific diagnosis and who are not on that spectrum, some schools are less likely to identify those needs because they will then have a legal obligation to meet them. A child does not have to have a diagnosis to have a need. I chose not to go ahead with a single diagnosis for my child as she was being tested all the time. I then had to fight the school system to explain that, just because her condition did not have a name, that did not mean that she did not have needs. It is really a financial issue for schools. I often felt sympathetic towards headteachers because they have to deal with all the financial implications. I was fighting for one child, while headteachers are fighting for the whole school.

Sandra White: You are absolutely right about the learning map. All members will have had constituents come to them with that particular problem. Enable is looking for a more proactive approach. It would be interesting to get information

from local authorities. If they were more proactive, they could identify cases such as the one that you mention in which a child should qualify for a learning map. Is that what you are looking for?

Linda Whitmore: I have spoken to many parents whose children have diagnoses. Julia, a mum on our committee, has two boys with autism who have had diagnoses for a long time. Even when a child has a clear diagnosis, that does not mean that they will receive the additional support that they need in the classroom. That often comes down to the classroom teacher. That was certainly the case with one of Julia's sons. The classroom teacher was well meaning but did not have even a basic understanding of how autism causes social interaction difficulties. Without that basic level of awareness, the legislation gets stuck. The three strands that I mentioned need to be in place: a basic understanding of learning disability and autism, communication skills—because not all pupils communicate in the same way—and behaviour management skills.

That is what we are asking for. It is being done but it is not mandatory, and that is the difference that we want. A lot of good work is being done, but we want to ensure that it is accessible to all teachers and support staff, as that would make a massive difference to families.

Bill Walker (Dunfermline) (SNP): Good afternoon, everyone. I have family experience of the subjects that we are talking about.

I have a fairly fundamental question. You raised the subject of money, unfortunately. Increasing pressure is being put on mainstream classroom teachers and assistants because they are expected to do more and more things well. Acting as devil's advocate, I wonder whether it would be worth while to direct current resources to specialist teachers rather than to training every new teacher in specialist skills, which would obviously be expensive, and it would be demanding for the teachers to learn a wide spectrum of skills. Would it not be more worth while to have more and better specialist teachers, not just in special schools but in special units attached to mainstream schools so that pupils could go back and forward, rather than have the whole thing mainstreamed for every teacher and assistant? What do you think of that as an option? I am just asking the question and not promoting it.

Nigel Over: My son was in a situation like that, in that training had been given to the classroom teacher and the classroom assistant but not to the rest of the school staff, which meant that he could not engage with them. He would go into a classroom where the teacher could not understand him and he would get frustrated and start self-injuring. The teacher would not know what to do, so they would call in the specialist teacher. We are

asking for a basic level of understanding to be reached through three areas of mandatory training so that each teacher would have sufficient confidence in their approach and would not have to refer to a plan or call in a specialist. We are looking for that kind of base level. It is not about putting the emphasis on specialist teachers, who at the moment have the desire, willingness or support that they need; it is about giving the skills to other staff, so that our children can be fully integrated into and involved with the whole school community.

Bill Walker: You have partly answered my question, because I wanted to establish what level of knowledge mainstream teachers need. You appear to suggest not that all mainstream teachers become specialist teachers, but that they are trained to such a level that they can recognise the problems, following which the child may have to be passed on to another learning environment, unfortunately.

Linda Whitmore: We are not expecting or asking for every teacher to have a deep understanding of every condition of learning disability; that would be unreasonable and inappropriate. We are asking for basic awareness of the needs of children with learning disabilities and autism, which covers a large number of pupils. We are asking for understanding of some practical strategies that can be put in place in the classroom, some of which are very simple, and of how to communicate with a child who does not speak to you. Those things do not cost a lot of money. When we offset that against the high cost of exclusions, we believe that the cost implications would not be huge. However, it is not for us to produce a detailed financial breakdown.

We are not asking for detailed training, but we do not feel that it would be appropriate for children with learning disabilities to be taught only by specialist teachers, because that would not create the fully inclusive environment that we aim for in schools. We would like training to be extended to all staff who come into contact with a child with learning disabilities or autism in the classroom.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I am aware of at least one local authority in Renfrewshire that has cut specialist psychological services in schools quite substantially. Is that being replicated in other local authorities? If that is the case, it would give more credence to your argument for the need for greater training for all teachers.

Amanda Bradley: I am not in Renfrewshire; however, I am in another local authority area where psychological services are being cut. I agree that cuts are going to be made across the board in many local authority areas, but the point is that teachers need to be made aware of these issues. Very often, the things that are referred up

to psychologists do not need to be and they are referred up only because teachers do not know how to cope with very minor issues. My daughter never had behavioural issues and had quite good levels of communication; her learning disability affected her learning, not her behaviour in class. However, eventually she became psychologically affected because the teachers were not aware of how to deal with what was not a severe learning disability.

That sort of refer-up-and-refer-out approach is exactly what we are trying to avoid. Children should not be referred up and referred out simply because the teacher does not know anything at all about anything that is going on with them. These matters can very often be dealt with at a much lower level and such an approach would support not only the education system as a whole, but children with more complex needs who have more need for resources that are not as available as they used to be.

Neil Bibby: You mentioned using university courses as a means of providing training. Have you had any discussions with universities as well as teachers and support staff about such training?

Linda Whitmore: We have been in discussion with universities. Indeed, a number of lecturers have taken the opportunity to make online comments about the petition. One said:

"With inclusion so established as an aspiration, such training should be mandatory"

while another pointed out:

"I believe it's so important that teachers are aware of social models of disability, social as well as educational inclusion, bullying, disabled children's rights".

We have also received many positive comments from teachers and support staff who see the need for this training to be mandatory.

Amanda Bradley: This semester, I gave a lecture to fourth-year students at the University of Strathclyde as part of an elective ASN module and yesterday I was part of a panel of people who had presented on it. The 120 students on the module, which I think was four times oversubscribed, are going to go into education next year and are desperate for information about and knowledge of how these things feel for parents and other teachers. We even had probationers present to the students to give them some idea of what they will come up against. The students were very positive about the module but, as I have said, they were not the only people who were interested in it. The whole year was very interested in doing it—ideally, the whole year should have done it—but there were simply not enough places.

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): I have a few questions, although you have partly

answered what I was going to ask. I am no expert on teacher training—I lay that on the table now. How many modules are done by an entire year and how many are elective? How might the mandatory element fit into the current teacher training set-up? Would it be fairly easy to achieve or will it involve a bit of manoeuvring?

Linda Whitmore: I am not an expert on teacher training either, so I cannot answer your question in any depth. Moreover, each university sets its own curriculum and such modules are not standard. However, I refer you to "Bridging the Training Gap", which details what each university offers and what their modules contain. It is not for me to rewrite the core initial teacher education curriculum and I do not intend to do so.

All the universities are embedding inclusion to a certain extent—in some cases it is minimal and involves only one or two lectures in first year—and are giving a general flavour of additional support for learning legislation and equalities issues. We want them to beef up the approach a bit and make it more in-depth, so that trainees are aware not just of the legislation but of how it translates into practical strategies in the classroom. We want that to be part of the core curriculum, although it is for the universities to decide exactly how to do that. I do not know whether that answers your question, but it is the best that I can do.

14:30

Mark McDonald: Your answer covered the issue, given that neither of us knows a huge amount about training. Perhaps the committee can explore the issue further.

You said that continuous professional development is patchy—I think that is the best way to describe it—across the local authorities. Have you approached local authorities that are not providing CPD opportunities in additional support needs in order that you can ascertain why?

Linda Whitmore: No—we have not done that yet. Our getting to this stage involved a very large piece of work, and an approach to local authorities would be the next step. I do not know whether that is a job for Enable Scotland or whether it is outwith our remit. We are not in a position to tell local authorities what to do.

The next step might be to highlight areas of good practice. It might be better to focus on areas in which an inclusive approach is mandatory, and to hold up examples of good practice. We are not here to pick out areas where things are not going well; we would rather concentrate on the positive and say, "Here's an authority that's doing this really well. You could roll that out."

Mark McDonald: I agree that sharing best practice is always the best way to proceed.

From listening to Nigel Over's comments and from my experience of working with headteachers in my capacity as a local councillor, it strikes me that when a pupil has additional support needs it is very much the role of the headteacher to satisfy themselves that staff in the school are appropriately aware of the issues and trained to deal with the child's needs. Beyond the question of higher levels of training, is there a role for headteachers in ensuring that, for a pupil who has a particular need, not just the class teacher but all staff are aware of that, because the child will have contact with more than just the class teacher during the day?

Linda Whitmore: I whole-heartedly agree that there is such a role, as would many of the parents who are members of Enable Scotland. I have several case studies from parents who have said that if the headteacher's attitude was different their child's experience would be different. One mum told me that her child's experience in school changed when one headteacher left and another came in—there was a clear demarcation between the two. It is often the headteacher who creates the school's ethos. Leadership is important, and it makes a massive difference if the headteacher creates an inclusive environment and is aware of the pupils who are under their supervision who have additional support needs. I completely agree that it should start with headteachers.

Mark McDonald: Headteachers undergo various training. I think that there are a number of certificates, including a certificate of leadership—I cannot remember the exact terminology. As well as considering general teacher training and CPD, perhaps headteacher training should be considered, given the crucial role that headteachers play.

The Convener: I thank everyone for their questions and answers. The committee must consider its next steps. There are options in the clerk's paper.

Sandra White: We should continue our consideration of the petition. I am concerned about the point that Nigel Over made about how one classroom teacher will know exactly what is happening but the child will move on to other classrooms, where the teachers do not know the situation. That came as quite a surprise to me—perhaps it did to other members.

We should take up Mark McDonald's idea about writing not just to teachers but to headteachers. We need to write to the Scottish Government and to the Scottish education quality and improvement agency, as well. I would also like to get feedback from the councils that provide mandatory training.

Mark McDonald: I agree with Sandra White. I was going to suggest that we write to the Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland. We could also write either to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities or, as Sandra suggests, to the authorities that offer mandatory training. We could also write to those that do not offer it to find out the reasons behind that—not to name and shame, but to see how we can encourage sharing of best practice.

Bill Walker: I reinforce the idea of contacting headteachers' associations. Apart from the leadership aspect, headteachers should at the very least be trained in techniques not only for identifying pupils but for handling them. Although I expressed some concern about training everyone, we should get right on to that one with headteachers.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I have listened carefully to the discussion and to the question and answer session, and I have dealt with constituents who have faced similar problems to those that have been identified today. I also feel for individual teachers who are, in effect, being asked to deal with situations for which they are not trained. I suggest, therefore, that we write to the Educational Institute of Scotland: I am sure that the EIS, as the professional body for teachers, will have been contacted by teachers saying that they are being expected to deliver on issues for which they are not trained.

The wider question is how we take the petition forward. In the question and answer session we talked about teachers and support staff. I have picked up from dealing with a constituent that not only support staff in the classroom, but the janitors, caretakers and catering staff all need to be aware of the needs of the children. Although the teacher is responsible in the classroom, the janitor and support staff are responsible in the playground. For many children the playground is the biggest barrier to full integration in the school.

Maybe we could write to local authorities to ask what type of support and training they give to the other staff in the environment of education, by whom I mean the janitors, caretakers and catering staff who deal with children daily and, in some cases, deal with them more hands-on than some teaching staff.

Sandra White: I agree with everything that has been said. When we write to the Scottish Government we should ask whether training of teaching and support staff, as detailed in the petition, has been considered by the Donaldson review working group.

The Convener: We agree to continue the petition in the terms that have been suggested by colleagues and using the points that have been

set out by the clerk. I thank all three witnesses for excellent evidence. We will continue to have a dialogue about your petition.

14:39

Meeting suspended.

14:40

On resuming—

Fruit Tree Planting (PE1410)

The Convener: The second new petition today is PE1410 on developing a fruitful future for all Scots. Paper 2 refers to the petition; members have a note by the clerk, the SPICe briefing and the petition.

I welcome John Hancox, who is chair of Scottish Orchards and director of the Children's Orchard, Jim Paterson from the Tarbert and Skipness Community Trust, and Mike Hyatt. I invite John Hancox to make a short presentation of around five minutes. Following that, there will be questions from the committee.

John Hancox (Scottish Orchards and the Children's Orchard): I am chair of Scottish Orchards and director of the Children's Orchard, under which we have a couple of projects—fruitful schools and the commonwealth orchard. In recent years, I have also brought an apple collection to the Scottish Parliament. I am grateful to John Wilson, who was one of the sponsors of that event.

Our vision is the creation of a fruitful Scotland, by which I mean people at grass-roots level across Scotland planting fruit trees, with children being heavily involved in the planting, harvesting and sharing of the fruit and enjoying what they have grown in a communal way. One interesting subsidiary idea from the commonwealth orchard project has been the old idea of commonwealth and planting for the good of the whole community. That is an ancient use of the word "commonwealth". Ultimately, the approach is about people growing and developing their communities and environments.

We deal with people of all ages and types—children, grandparents, parents and landowners—and we deal with places of all types, including community gardens, schools, hospital grounds, forestry parks and churches. Churches have a long history of being involved in fruit growing, going back to medieval times. Urban orchards also have a long history.

The benefits of fruit growing are more about people than fruit. We have used the projects in many situations, including in Castlemilk and

Drumchapel in Glasgow, and in places in Edinburgh. Just before we came into the committee, we were talking to a teacher from Ferryhill primary school in the Pilton and Drylaw area. We planted a small orchard there, which has led to the school's being involved in planting fruit trees elsewhere in the community. It is a way to allow people to get their hands dirty and to do something practical, simple and fairly inexpensive. It brings people together to take a hand in improving their local environment and their lives.

There are educational benefits from the fruitful schools project; for example, it ties in with curricular aspects, including eco-schools. Susan Reid, the teacher from Ferryhill, talked about the new curriculum for excellence and pointed out that the project works from the early years right through to secondary and touches many different parts of the curriculum. She can involve science, literature, literacy and all kinds of other aspects. She has had children doing poetry in the orchard. She also pointed out that the project fits well with the school year.

I will try to rattle through other benefits. There are community benefits. I mentioned the apple day that we did here at the Scottish Parliament—we take the apple day all round Scotland. It is a really good way to get people together to see some of the food that grows in Scotland, and to get them thinking about local food. People often start by planting orchards, and then get involved in planting other things.

14:45

I will briefly mention environment and biodiversity aspects. Some apple varieties have very long histories in Scotland—for example, the golden pippin has been growing here for 400 years. There are a lot of interesting apples such as the bloody ploughman, which is a Perthshire apple, and the Scotch dumpling. Some, such as the white Melrose and the Galloway pippin, clearly have regional histories.

Another interesting aspect, which I will ask Jim Paterson to talk about, is that local food can displace fruit that would be brought in from Chile or New Zealand, for example. It seems a bit daft to bring things halfway around the world if they already grow here.

Other aspects are perhaps worth touching on, such as tourism and changing the perception of Scotland with regard to the Government's "Scotland: land of food and drink" policy initiative. Also, grow-your-own generally, and orchards in particular, can create good-quality volunteering opportunities so that people can learn skills to equip them for the future.

There are all sorts of interesting spin-offs including products such as juices, jams and so on—as well as simply producing fruit that people can eat. More generally, in terms of economic benefits, the idea of creating a fruitful Scotland involves people developing confidence and employability skills, which will ultimately make Scotland a better place in which to work and live.

We have worked in a lot of different places to plant fruit trees in the past few years. School grounds are an important part of that. Mike Hyatt is a landscape architect with whom I have worked for a number of years; he has been involved with housing association land and forestry land, so he will talk about that.

The Convener: We are a bit short of time, so we can perhaps bring some of those issues out in questions.

John Hancox: Of course. I would like the committee to do what it can to encourage schools throughout Scotland to consider school orchards. We would like to look at developing places where we can hold collections of Scottish fruit trees in order to protect varieties for the future. There are other interesting arms and legs to our work.

I spoke yesterday to someone who is working in Castlemilk. She had planted in a school there a plum tree, which she had taken into the school assembly. The kids loved it and had spent the whole morning working with her on planting it and missed their break. She said that the children know how important trees are; they just need some help in cherishing them.

The Convener: Thank you very much for your presentation. I have a quick question, and then I will pass over to John Wilson. Is there any crossover with the eco-schools projects? I was involved with Eigg primary school, which did similar work not specifically on apple trees, but on a much wider scale. Have you had any involvement with that project?

John Hancox: I was also involved with Eigg primary school, which planted a wee orchard on Eigg. I fed into the eco-schools project last year. The school added a food topic, and we recently supported a competition and a local food picnic, which ties in closely with the project.

The more linking in with existing projects that we can do, the better. The National Trust for Scotland and the Woodland Trust have land available, so they may well be able to support such work.

The Convener: I will bring in John Wilson. I encourage the other witnesses to feel free to contribute to the discussion.

John Wilson: John Hancox has already made my declaration of interests for me. With other members, I have co-sponsored and co-hosted

apple day in the Scottish Parliament for the past two years. Members who have attended that event have been genuinely amazed by the number of apple and other fruit varieties that are grown in Scotland. For me, that is where part of the issue lies.

I have known John Hancox for a couple of years and have taken the opportunity to see the work that he does with local schools in the botanic gardens in Glasgow, where schools have 1 square metre around an apple tree. The children are shown that as well as being able to grow fruit trees, they can grow things that people can benefit from, such as vegetables, around the bottom of the fruit trees.

The National Trust for Scotland has been mentioned. Have there been any discussions with it, Historic Scotland, the Forestry Commission and the Woodland Trust about how we might open up some of their land to orchard developments? I must declare a sad interest in that, when I was in Cornwall a couple of years ago, I visited a National Trust house that hosts the Cornish apple orchard, which brings together a number of apple varieties from Cornwall. I was introduced to an apple that I was assured had a 1,000-year pedigree—the Pendragon apple—so it is clear that orchards and fruit growing have a long history not only in Scotland, but throughout the United Kingdom. Has there been any discussion with such agencies about how we can expand fruit growing and open up what, in many cases, is public land to allow more orchards to be developed in Scotland?

John Hancox: I have had lots of discussions with different groups. Probably the most coherent discussions that I have had input to recently have been the Scottish Government's grow-your-own working group's discussions. Sadly—to my mind—the recommendations that came out of its report were largely to do with allotments. Although allotments are great in their way, it would have been nice if some recommendations had been to do with the benefits of orchards, among which is the fact of just how many people can get involved. Orchards can be open and many people can benefit from them, but the nature of allotments is such that they tend to be quite land hungry and to have relatively few beneficiaries for the area of ground that they occupy. Orchards are a way of involving people.

Although Robin Harper, who has been involved in my apple days over the years, has stepped down as an MSP, he is now on the board of the National Trust for Scotland, and I think that he is quite interested in grow-your-own. However, there is no coherent discussion about orchards, so it would be great to make that happen.

John Wilson: I note that the submission that accompanied the petition raised the issue of trying

to retain some of the apple varieties that were traditionally grown in Scotland. I note with disappointment John Butterworth's decision to step down from the nursery in which he used to grow traditional Scottish varieties of apples. Have there been any efforts to ensure that we do not lose any of the traditional varieties of apples that are unique to Scotland, such as the Stirling castle and the Cambusnethan pippin? We should find a way of retaining those traditional varieties so that they are not lost or crowded out by the golden delicious and the McIntosh red. Although those varieties are useful, they are not seen as apples that are traditional in Scotland.

Mike Hyatt: That is not something that I am directly involved in, but I would say that there is a general need to retain genetic diversity in the British isles and that, if Scotland has its own specific varieties, they should be preserved. If, at the moment, their protection relies on private individuals, perhaps something more official should be put in place.

On the general point about who in local authorities and agencies is involved in promoting orchards, as a landscape architect, I have been working for years with housing associations to promote apple and other fruit tree planting in their properties. I have found that the drive for that promotion often comes from me, not anyone else. We are working with 16 national health service hospitals through the green exercise partnership, which is run by the Forestry Commission. As yet, it does not appear that the promotion of fruit growing in hospital grounds is in any official NHS policy, which is interesting.

Bill Walker: Apologies for my interruption earlier. I was extremely keen to speak and was trying to attract the convener's attention.

This is a no-brainer project. It is all win-win. I am pleased with the answers that have been given so far.

I was pleased to participate in the recent opening of the Townhill orchard in Dunfermline, in my constituency, which was very encouraging. Lots and lots of people were there—perhaps one of you was there as well.

Next week, I am asking a question of Richard Lochhead in the chamber and I will try to work in something about orchards. We will see how that goes.

Rather unusually, it would appear that you are coming to the committee not to ask for money but to try to get people to work together in a positive fashion across the agencies. Am I right in thinking that you are simply trying to propagandise in order to get people to work together for what must be the common good?

John Hancox: Resources are never unwelcome. However, the thing that is attractive about this project is that it is not resource hungry. It is not expensive to develop school or community orchards. I would not want it to develop an elaborate bureaucracy. Of course, it might be helpful to have a lightweight structure to help people and draw together knowledge and expertise, but that would not be expensive.

Jim Paterson might be able to say more about the issue. I have been working with him for a while. He has developed an orchard project in Kintyre that is applicable in other parts of Scotland.

15:00

Jim Paterson (Tarbert and Skipness Community Trust): We started a project about two years ago. We got some funding from the climate challenge fund for grow-your-own food and we found that it was difficult to get people enthused until we came up with the idea of the Tarbert orchard. The idea behind the orchard was that anybody in the village could get a free tree and plant it anywhere—in their back garden if they wanted. It was not an orchard that you had to go to; it was in your back garden. That was the key that opened up a floodgate, and a lot of people then came to us looking for fruit trees and advice on local food.

As John Hancox said, we managed, after a lot of searching, to find some calculations to show how much carbon saving there was from 200 fruit trees and we have developed from there. We are about to plant 1,000 fruit trees in Kintyre, so we will have planted 1,350 in total. They will be given to schools, community groups, old people's homes, care homes and so on.

As Mike Hyatt said, the NHS may not be planning to plant fruit trees as it should. Argyll and Bute Council cut the fruit in school meals and yet one school came up with the idea of planting a fruit tree. I think that we should push the idea quite significantly.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): What you are doing is tremendous. I have a medical background and think that it presses all the right exercise, fitness and healthy-eating buttons.

I was slightly concerned, or disappointed, when you spoke about allotments. I did quite a bit of work in the previous session with the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society. From what Jim Paterson just said, I do not see what you are doing as incompatible with allotments. It is about getting enthusiasm going. There is great demand for allotments—there just is not the land available for all the people who want them to have allotments.

We have been pushing hard for health boards and other organisations, such as railway companies, to give over land that is currently unused for the growing of vegetables. To have a tree in every allotment would be great. If you could get the same enthusiasm going for that, it could build on what you are doing. What are your views on that?

John Hancox: I do not want it to be either/or, as both things have their place. What is interesting about the orchard model is that, when people get interested in planting a few fruit trees, quite often they get interested in planting other things, so it drives demand for community gardens, allotments and other things.

Jim Paterson: The two things do not have to be exclusive. Low, step-over trees can be grown as a border around an allotment site. You do not need to have a big tree; you can have something else.

Nanette Milne: I was thinking that, instead of an orchard being a stimulus for growing other things, growing other things might be the stimulus for an orchard. I do not know whether it is a chicken-and-egg situation, but we could try to get a sequence like that.

Neil Bibby: Politicians often talk about comparing apples with apples, and today is no different. This idea is interesting and innovative and I do not want to put a downer on it at all, but there is a concern at the back of my mind about the vandalism that sometimes happens in and around school playgrounds and places like that. Is that something you have come across and have you taken any steps to minimise potential vandalism of such projects?

John Hancox: Susan Reid, from Ferryhill primary school, who was here earlier, said that of the 30 fruit trees that we planted in Pilton, one got pulled up—they replanted it and it is fine—and another got broken, over about three years. The attitude to these things is that stuff happens; you replant the trees and get on with it. It might be worth handing this question to Mike Hyatt, but my experience is that vandalism is not a huge problem in schools. It can be harder to establish orchards in very public areas.

Mike Hyatt: I agree. Generally, schools are a protected area in which to plant fruit trees as a starter. When I was looking at areas in which to promote fruit tree planting, I avoided open spaces and parks. That was about 10 years ago, but the world has moved on a bit on the planting of trees and people are a lot more aware of it now than they used to be. I started through housing associations and planted in gardens, which provided a protected area. However, John Hancox has now started planting in parks. I have not come across any major vandalism problems. For some

reason, fruit trees seem to be better protected than other types of tree.

The Convener: I am afraid that we are very short of time, but I bring in Sandra White.

Sandra White: I will be as brief as possible. I am glad that Jim Paterson explained the concept of the orchards, because my perception was of acres of ground, but that is not what you are asking for. You referred in your submission to trying to meet Glasgow City Council officials and the Government to try to get some official backing via the Commonwealth games legacy. As I come from Glasgow and represent Glasgow Kelvin, that is of interest to me. You said that you have been unsuccessful in that. Could you write to us saying why that is the case or give us a shortened version now? I know that Glasgow Housing Association, which is aligned with the council, is doing what you are talking about and is taking over land and planting. I would like Glasgow City Council to meet you, or us. I just wonder why your approach has been unsuccessful.

John Hancox: We have had meetings. The landscape architects put the concept of planting fruit trees in the Commonwealth games village into the master plan but, for whatever reason, the development and regeneration services department of Glasgow City Council did not want to proceed with fruit trees. We have had meetings with Gerry Grams, who I think is the head of design or landscape, but I am not sure what the council's reasons are. We have been through the loop, but it feels like a very difficult problem to get over.

Sandra White: I do not mean to interrupt, but I know that we are short of time. Just to circumvent matters, I am happy to write to the council on the issue, if that would be okay, convener. However, if we continue the petition, perhaps the committee will write to the council.

The Convener: Thank you for that. Do any other members urgently want to come in?

Nanette Milne: I understand that there will be a debate in Parliament next week about the Commonwealth games, in which I might allude to orchards in my speech.

John Hancox: That would be splendid.

The Convener: We move to the next stage in which the committee needs to consider the recommendation for the next step for the petition.

John Wilson: We should continue the petition and seek some answers from the Scottish Government on the issues that the petition raises. We should ask the Government what it is doing or intends to do to encourage engagement with communities to ensure that fruit trees are planted in communities. I suggest that we also write to the

National Trust for Scotland, Historic Scotland, the Woodland Trust Scotland and the Forestry Commission Scotland, which are all large landowners and are supposed to engage with communities throughout Scotland, to find out their views on the petition and whether they would like to engage in developing community orchards throughout Scotland. We should also ask the Government whether it supports the concept of a Commonwealth games orchard.

The Convener: That is helpful. Thank you.

Nanette Milne: We should also write to the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society and try to gain its enthusiasm for the concept.

Sandra White: Can we write to Glasgow City Council as well?

John Hancox: Am I allowed to make a suggestion?

The Convener: If it is brief, Mr Hancox.

John Hancox: It would be interesting if you could write to the Scottish Government's grow-your-own working group to ask whether orchards could be included in its recommendations.

The Convener: Thank you. That is helpful.

The conclusion is that we will continue the petition in line with the clerk's option 1 and members' comments. I thank our two witnesses for coming and for their comprehensive evidence. The petition is interesting.

15:10

Meeting suspended.

15:11

On resuming—

Current Petitions

School Bus Safety (PE1098 and PE1223)

The Convener: There are 12 current petitions for consideration today. The first two will be considered together. They are PE1098, in the name of Lynn Merrifield, and PE1223, in the name of Ron Beaty, on school bus safety. Members have a note by the clerk and submissions. I refer members to an additional letter from Keith Brown, which gives an update on his original letter on the issue. It is a fairly positive letter—I will say no more than that. I invite comments from members.

Nanette Milne: I am delighted to see Mr Beaty here again. He has been at almost every meeting at which his petition has been discussed and he has taken a keen interest in it. The situation is a little difficult, because the petitions have been on the go for a long time. Although we have not quite reached stalemate, it sometimes feels like it. However, the letter from Keith Brown gives us a good handle that will allow us to keep the petitions going. He has a meeting on 15 December with the Minister for Local Government and Planning and the Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages. It would be a good idea to wait for the outcome of that meeting and to ask for feedback on it.

Mark McDonald: I agree that we should continue the petition. My colleague Dr Eilidh Whiteford MP has written to the Secretary of State for Transport and received a response that sets out that the current legislation requires all coaches and minibuses that carry groups of children aged three to 15 on organised trips to be equipped with seat belts. That applies only to organised trips, so I am not sure whether it covers day-to-day school transport. However, Keith Brown's response is encouraging.

Although one of the petitions deals exclusively with seat belts, a fundamental aspect of Mr Beaty's petition is the issues of signage, lights and overtaking stationary school buses. That is a key concern, particularly in the north-east, where such overtaking has led to a number of tragedies. We need to make representations on the issues of signage, lights and overtaking to ensure that they do not fall off the agenda and that we do not become focused purely on seat belts. I realise that measures on signage and lights will be difficult because buses in Scotland tend not to be used purely for school transport, whereas school buses in other nations are used for school transport alone. The committee ought to keep an eye on

that aspect of the petition to ensure that we do not focus simply on seat belts. Although seat belts are important, the issues of signage, lights and overtaking are equally important.

15:15

John Wilson: As Nanette Milne said, the committee has been dealing with the two petitions for some time.

I want to put on record my disappointment at the response to the convener from the minister, Keith Brown, in his November letter. I thought that the committee had moved forward in the debate and got on record the willingness of the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Government to move the agenda forward. In some respects, the November letter suggested that the Scottish Government was drawing back from that position. However, Keith Brown's December letter seems to contain open signs of encouragement that he is going to sit down with his ministerial colleagues to discuss the wider impact on other departments of any legislation that comes to Scotland.

I hope that the committee will be able to get a full report of the meeting on 15 December and the action points that emerge from it, to allow us to take both petitions forward. Both petitions are crucial for the safety of those travelling in school transport and those boarding and alighting from it. As Mark McDonald said, that is particularly important for buses picking up children in rural areas, but it is also important in urban areas where such services still exist. Many local authorities have cut back on them. It is encouraging that the minister has now taken the matter forward and, given the willingness of the UK transport minister, we should see some developments in the near future. I hope that they will not take as long as it has taken to get to this stage.

The Convener: I thank Mr Wilson for raising that point. My own feeling was that the original letter was inappropriate and that the minister did not treat our committee with very much respect. Having said that, I believe in sinners who repent, and I think that the most recent letter was a big improvement. I should like to put that on record, as it is Christmas. We are now considering the next stages for the petition, on which we have heard strong recommendations from Nanette Milne and Mark McDonald.

Neil Bibby: I agree with John Wilson's point about asking to see the action points from the meeting on 15 December.

The Convener: Do members agreed to continue the petition in the light of the comments made by Nanette Milne, Mark McDonald, John Wilson and Neil Bibby?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you all for your contributions.

A90/A937 (Safety Improvements) (PE1236)

The Convener: PE1236 was lodged in the name of Jill Campbell. I ask members to note that she has had a change of name and is now Jill Fotheringham. Members have a note by the clerk and submissions, and paper 4 refers. There is also a note from Nigel Don, as well as a late submission from the petitioner. I ask committee members to be aware of the late submissions, because they are material to our discussions today.

Mark McDonald: I am aware that the petition has been before the committee, in more than one guise, for some time. The submission from the local member is helpful, because it shows that he is pursuing these matters locally, particularly with the local authorities. I also note that the petitioner has suggested a possible compromise solution in the form of a split-level junction, as opposed to a grade-separated junction. Perhaps we should contact the Scottish Government to see whether it might consider that solution, as it could be less costly than grade separation while still having the desired effect in terms of safety.

A recent television programme highlighted the concerns surrounding the junction, which I pass regularly on my way to and from Edinburgh. Anyone with any experience of it will recognise that it is not ideal; that is probably the politest way of putting it. We might not get any action on grade separation in the immediate future, but it would be helpful if we could find a compromise solution.

Nanette Milne: I agree with what Mark McDonald has said. I watched the programme that he mentioned. No one who saw it can be in any doubt that the junction is dangerous. The BBC person who made the programme was horrified by the junction when he was there. Nigel Don should go ahead with the suggested meeting with the councils and the north-east of Scotland transport partnership to see whether something else can be done, short of a grade-separated junction. Something certainly needs to be done, and quickly.

Mark McDonald: I do not know what the protocol is when a local member tells the committee that he or she is pursuing things. Should we ask Nigel Don to update us on the outcome of his discussions? That will obviously be germane to our consideration of the petition.

The Convener: I will take some advice from the clerk on that.

There is nothing to prevent us from getting some advice from a member about action that he or she is carrying out, but it should not tie our hands as a committee. We can write to the relevant authorities ourselves.

Mark McDonald: Absolutely. To clarify, my point is that Mr Don is pursuing matters that are related to the petition, and if he has some success in his discussions that might affect our consideration of the petition, it would be helpful if we knew of it. I am sure that, as a former member of the committee, Mr Don will be more than happy to keep us posted on how he gets on.

The Convener: Perhaps we could raise the proposed split-level junction, which you mentioned. Should the committee ask the relevant authorities about that?

Mark McDonald: Yes.

The Convener: I presume that Aberdeenshire Council and Transport Scotland both have a role.

Mark McDonald: They are definitely the two bodies that we need to contact on the matter.

The Convener: I propose that we seek specific advice on that issue from those two bodies. When we get their responses, we can make a decision about the petition. Do members agree?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you for that.

Institutional Child Abuse (Victims' Forum and Compensation) (PE1351)

The Convener: PE1351, in the name of Chris Daly and Helen Holland, is on a time for all to be heard forum. Following our evidence session two weeks ago with the Scottish Human Rights Commission and the ministers, the committee agreed to consider a further note by the clerk on what action we wish to take. That is in paper 5. I seek contributions from members.

Sandra White: I think that we all agree that it was an interesting session. There were some interesting answers and it raised a number of questions, also. We should continue the petition, particularly as Mr Wilson of the SHRC wrote to the convener—I think the letter came in on 5 December—urging the Government to take leadership on what we heard is going to happen, which will now be in January or February 2012. That is not far away.

We should ask the Scottish Government the various questions that are in the paper, and we should also write to Tom Shaw to see what his views are on the various issues that came out in the evidence. We should find out whether the Scottish Government is going to take the lead on

the work that is going to be carried forward concerning the victims. Has it committed to engage with the interaction framework, as the SHRC has urged? We should also ask for an update on the interaction that will take place in 2012 and ask what scoping work the Scottish Government is going to do and what discussions it has had with the UK Government with regard to compensation and victims' rights.

The Convener: My understanding from the SHRC witness at our previous meeting is that, although 2012 has been mentioned, we do not have a specific timescale, because there is an awful lot of work to be done first. I think that it was just a general comment that was made.

Do other members have comments?

John Wilson: Convener, given your comment about the timescale and the fact that other things have to be done and put in place, I suggest that, when we write to the Scottish Government, we ask what its timetable is for progressing the issues that were raised in the Shaw commission report and the SHRC's report in 2010. We can then consider at a future meeting the timetable that the Scottish Government has devised. We could also consider whether we should go back to the petitioners and possibly to Tom Shaw and the SHRC to find out whether the Government's timetable is adequate and will deliver on what is being requested of the Government in relation to a time for all to be heard.

Bill Walker: This is a very important subject. We should ask for a timetable for things being done as opposed to things being talked about.

Neil Bibby: I agree with the comments made previously. The timetable is important, and it is slightly disappointing that there appears to have been movement back the way on the timings for discussions on interaction. Because of the points that have been raised by the SHRC, we should ask the Scottish Government what it is prepared to do on interaction, and what remedies it proposes.

The Convener: Is it therefore agreed that we will continue the petition in line with the option in paper 5 and with the comments that members have made?

Members indicated agreement.

Leisure and Cultural Facilities (Young People) (PE1369)

The Convener: PE1369, in the name of Jodie McCoy, on behalf of South Ayrshire youth forum, is on the need to have regard to young people when considering changes to leisure and cultural facilities. Members have a note from the clerk.

Sandra White: I have read through the petition and the submissions again. I note that the Scottish Government has recently consulted on a bill on the rights of children and young people. I hope that the bill will take aspects of the petition on board, placing them in the wider context of children's rights. The issue will be considered by the Scottish Government, so I think that we can close the petition.

The Convener: Do members agree that we should close the petition?

Neil Bibby: Have we asked for the petitioner's views on the Government response?

The Convener: Yes.

Neil Bibby: That is fine.

The Convener: Do members agree that we should close the petition under rule 15.7, on the basis that the Scottish Government has consulted on a bill on the rights of children and young people, which should allow the issues that are raised in the petition to be taken forward in the wider context of rights?

Members indicated agreement.

Wild Land (Protection) (PE1383)

The Convener: PE1383, by Helen McDade, on behalf of the John Muir Trust, is on better protection for wild land. Members have a note from the clerk.

Mark McDonald: We should continue the petition, and we should consider it again once SNH's mapping work has been concluded. I recently met Helen McDade, and I am given to understand that she was not originally able to make a presentation because the petition was part of a large batch towards the end of the previous session of Parliament. Because of that, I wonder whether we might invite the petitioner to speak to us and give us her views at a meeting once SNH has completed its work and we have its evidence.

The Convener: I will have a discussion with the clerk about that.

Bill Walker: I, too, have met the lady concerned. I am interested in the whole topic, because the protection of wild land is obviously an important thing in any country. We do not have much legislation in that regard in Scotland, so the petition should definitely be continued. We should seek more information from the John Muir Trust.

The Convener: Is it agreed that we should follow option 1 in the clerk's paper, which is to consider the petition again once SNH has completed phase 2 of its mapping work?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Helen McDade is in the public gallery, and I welcome her. We will ask the clerk to produce a note on oral evidence, and we will ensure that she is invited for the next meeting on this petition.

Coastguard Stations (Closure) (PE1389)

15:30

The Convener: PE1389, in the name of David Macbeth, is on the adverse impact of coastguard station closures. Members have a note by the clerk. I invite comments from members.

Mark McDonald: Given that the Government has already taken the action that is requested in the petition and the petitioner has not responded to the committee on the two occasions on which he has been contacted, I think that we should close the petition under rule 15.7.

The Convener: Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Orphan Diseases (Access to Therapy) (PE1398)

Pompe Disease (Access to Therapy) (PE1399)

Paroxysmal Nocturnal Haemoglobinuria (Access to Therapy) (PE1401)

The Convener: The next petitions are PE1398, in the name of Alastair Kent, on behalf of Rare Disease UK, on access to therapy for orphan diseases; PE1399, in the name of Allan Muir, on equitable access to therapy for Pompe disease; and PE1401, in the name of Lesley Loeliger, on behalf of PNH Scotland, and Professor Peter Hillmen, on behalf of the PNH Alliance, on access to therapy for paroxysmal nocturnal haemoglobinuria. Members have a note by the clerk and submissions. I invite comments from members.

Nanette Milne: I think that we should keep the petitions open. The issue is complex, as we know, and there have been a number of submissions about it. We should look for more information from the Government, asking for its response to the points and requests that have been made by the petitioners in recent submissions. I would be interested to know how the new system of individual patient treatment requests—what used to be called exceptional prescribing—is going, as I get mixed reports about it. I know that orphan diseases are a slightly different issue, but I think that it ties in with the whole concept of drugs that are not generally available being given to patients.

Sandra White: I agree with Nanette Milne and bow to her expert medical knowledge. I also thank everyone we contacted for getting back to us. The health boards and Healthcare Improvement Scotland have been excellent at getting back to us. We do not always get that level of information and I would like to thank them for it.

The Convener: I endorse that. Is the committee agreed that we will continue the petitions in line with option 1 in the clerk's paper and Nanette Milne's comments?

Members indicated agreement.

Adult Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Diagnosis and Treatment) (PE1402)

The Convener: PE1402, in the name of Richard Jones, on behalf of Addressing the Balance, is on a strategy and policy for diagnosing and treating adult attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in Scotland. Members have a note by the clerk. I invite comments from members.

Mark McDonald: I have had meetings with Addressing the Balance since the petition was lodged and we are currently in discussions about the potential to hold a reception in the Parliament, which we hope will help to inform elected members about the issues in the petition. I think that we should continue the petition. The petitioner has helpfully given us some guidance on asking the Scottish Government about the potential for a thematic review under the mental health strategy, and I think that we should pursue that.

I remain concerned about whether work is being done more widely in health board areas to identify some of the issues around ADHD. We got a fairly comprehensive reply from NHS Lothian, which was identified as a best-practice health board in that regard. I wonder whether we should write to other health boards, asking what awareness they have of adult ADHD and what services they provide to accommodate individuals with ADHD. We should perhaps do that on top of writing to the Scottish Government along the lines suggested by the petitioner.

The Convener: Does the committee agree to Mark McDonald's suggestions along with option 1 in the clerk's paper?

Members indicated agreement.

Victims of Crime (Support and Assistance) (PE1403)

The Convener: The final petition is PE1403, in the name of Peter Morris, on improving support and assistance to victims of crime and their

families. Members have a note by the clerk. I invite comments from members.

Mark McDonald: When Mr Morris attended the committee to give evidence, he was in a foot cast and, sadly, subsequently had to lose the lower part of his leg as a result of the injuries that he sustained. Having been heavily involved in the process with Mr Morris, I think that we should put on record our best wishes to him as he tries to recover from that setback. He said to me and to the press that if he can make some positive changes, the loss of his leg will have been worth it.

We should continue the petition. Mr Morris's suggestion that there should be a single point of contact has a lot of merit, and we should ask the Government whether it is factoring that into its considerations. I do not expect the Government to tell us whether it will definitely be included in the legislation. We should also seek further information from the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland on whether it would welcome the use of a single point of contact in the circumstances as compared with the current situation. I suggest that we take those two steps at this stage.

The Convener: Are members happy with that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I am advised that we have written to Mr Morris and have received a very positive note back from him, which is in the committee papers. I totally endorse Mark McDonald's comments. Mr Morris lodged an excellent petition and has shown a lot of bravery in very difficult circumstances. Is it agreed that we will continue the petition in the terms suggested by Mark McDonald and the clerk's note?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: As this is our last meeting before Christmas and new year, I put on record my thanks to all members for their contributions, the clerks, the official report and our colleagues from broadcasting. I also thank all the petitioners. We have had a good session in the run-up to Christmas.

Meeting closed at 15:36.

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e-format first available
ISBN 978-1-4061-8000-8

Revised e-format available
ISBN 978-1-4061-8014-5

Printed in Scotland by APS Group Scotland
